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STORY OF A COUP

Kissinger's Bangladesh Sideshow

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The peripheral nations always pay the heaviest toll. The tragic course of Cambodia's history after Henry Kissinger's extension of the war in Southeast Asia is only one instance of this principle. Kissinger's conduct of American foreign policy was marked by repeated lesser-known interventions, both covert and military, in the affairs of numerous countries.

There were many sideshows, and one of them was in Bangladesh. Kissinger's role with respect to that hardly noticed country, which was born out of the bloody civil war of 1970-71, raises additional disturbing questions about the cynical assumptions that influenced our foreign policy during the Kissinger years. One result of Kissinger's "tilt" policy toward Pakistan's military regime during that civil war was to help prolong a conflict that ultimately claimed nearly a million casualties and created more than eight million refugees. And yet, in large measure because Asian rather than American blood was spilled, the record of Kissinger's covert maneuvering in Bangladesh has remained obscure.

Ever since columnist Jack Anderson obtained transcripts of National Security Council meetings concerning the 1971 Bangladesh crisis, we have known that Kissinger viewed the tilt to Pakistan as a necessary ingredient of his China policy; and, of course, in retrospect, his opening to China was a key to his bureaucratic staying power in the Nixon Administration. Now, new documentary evidence, extensive interviews with State Department and Central Intelligence Agency officials and access to some 150 interviews conducted in connection with an aborted study sponsored by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace make it possible to reconstruct the covert facet of the tilt policy. To Kissinger, Bangladesh was an irritant threatening to upset more important global realignments already in motion, and so he set about by secret diplomacy to break up the Bangladesh Awami League, which was in the forefront of that country's struggle for independence.

What is particularly startling, however, about this new information, is that a coup d'etat four years later (on August 15, 1975) which overthrew the social democratic Government of Sheik Mujibur Rahman was organized by the same right-wing clique that carried out repeated secret contacts with Kissinger in
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Pakistani Army cracked down on Mujibur Rahman's democratic movement, driving Pakistan into a civil war that resulted in the creation of a new nation, Bangladesh, out of the ashes of the former East Pakistan.

Within the American State Department these events created a severe and open rift. Despite mass killings in Dacca carried out with American-supplied weapons, Kissinger and his national security aide for South Asia, Harold Saunders, supported the Pakistani junta and maintained a tilt policy, which resulted in a bitter disagreement in the foreign service. Twenty U.S. consular officials, led by Archer Blood, the consul general in Dacca, cabled from East Pakistan their collective dissent:

> Our government has failed to denounce the suppression of democracy. Our government has failed to take forceful measures to protect its citizens while at the same time bending over backwards to placate the West Pak dominated government. . . . Our government has evidenced what many will consider moral bankruptcy, ironically at a time when the U.S.S.R. sent President Yahya a message defending democracy, condemning the arrest of a leader of a democratically elected majority party. . . . But we have chosen not to intervene, even morally, on the grounds that the Awami conflict, in which unfortunately the overworked term genocide is applicable, is purely an internal matter of a sovereign state. Private Americans have expressed disgust. We, as professional public servants, express our dissent.

This passionate indictment against massacre was ignored by Kissinger. During the spring of 1971 the overriding priority of U.S. policy in South Asia was Kissinger's plan for a dramatic shift in Sino-American relations. On July 9, in the midst of Pakistan's civil war, he would travel secretly in a Pakistani aircraft from Islamabad to Peking. Kissinger's own political prospects within the Nixon Administration were hinged on this venture. All other questions took a subordinate position.